Good times bad times

Plymouth retailer Unity MacLean has keen insights on Led Zeppelin. After all, she was once its publicist.

By Mark Pothier, Globe Staff, 11/11/2003

PLYMOUTH -- Unity MacLean leans against the counter of her Plymouth shop and with a plush Oxford accent chats about drugs and decadence as if she is recounting a day at the office. But at her former place of employment, a productive week was one that ended in chaos before calamity, and the bottom line became a bottomless supply of cocaine. "When I look back at it, I was in a very dangerous situation," she says. "It was quite nasty at the end."

Today, MacLean deals in such Anglo essentials as Yorkshire pudding, Cornish pasties, and Walkers potato crisps at British Imports, which she opened 21 years ago.

Some regular customers swear that the Court Street store's stock of Cadbury chocolates is surpassed only by its owner's sweetness. Few realize that this short woman with a long laugh is a walking "Behind the Music" episode.

From 1975 until after drummer John Bonham's death in 1980, MacLean worked in a two-story building on London's Kings Road as Led Zeppelin's publicist. They were the waning years of an era when rock stars were treated like deities, except God did not electrify his pearly gates to repel fans. Zeppelin hoarded the trappings of 1970s excess, including their own record label (Swan Song), a commercial-size Boeing, willing girls of hazy ages, and enough illegal substances to finance a South American dictator.

MacLean had an advantage over other applicants for the publicist's position: She was qualified. "I was in the A&R Department at CBS Records, and the people [Zeppelin] had working for them up until that point were mostly hangers-on, drug dealers, or people they liked the look of," she says.

Richard Cole, the band's longtime tour manager and coauthor of "Stairway to Heaven: Led Zeppelin Uncensored," says MacLean remained calm amid the maelstrom. "Unity had an impossible task. You couldn't get anything done," he says by telephone from Los Angeles. "But she was always the same -- very polite." (In the book's first chapter, Cole sweats out heroin in a Rome jail while reading a letter from MacLean about Bonham's fatal vodka binge.)

MacLean and her husband, Bruce, came to the United States in 1982 to be near his ailing mother in Hingham. They live in Plymouth, and have two children -- Luke, 22, and Alexandra, 17 -- neither of whom is a music "disciple" like their parents were, Bruce says. Unity has not spoken with the three surviving members of Led Zeppelin since leaving England. "They were in one country, I was in another. You just tend to lose touch with people," she says. "There wasn't a falling out."

And while it has been a long time since she rock 'n' rolled, MacLean's past persists like a live-album drum solo. "How the West Was Won," a collection of previously unreleased California concert performances from 1972, topped the CD charts earlier this year. Jimmy Page guitar riffs are an academic requirement in the Jack Black film "The School of Rock." And Lisa Robinson writes in the November issue of Vanity Fair that a "new generation has discovered the band" through Cadillac commercials fueled by the 32-year-old song "Rock and Roll."
"It's really quite amazing to go into a store and see a 17-year-old wearing a Led Zeppelin T-shirt," MacLean says.

The fans she remembers were not as well-heeled as the Escalade drivers lip-synching to Robert Plant ("Those people probably have never heard that music in their lives"), but MacLean, 54, can identify with the television spot's soft-sell affluence. She was born in Windsor, England, and grew up in the Buckinghamshire countryside. Her mother's family owned two estates and an apartment. Her father was a nationally known cricket player "who loved the press." She, her sister, and two brothers delighted in his television interviews because Dad had a secret signal. "He would pull on his ear or scratch his nose, and that was the 'Hello, kids,' " she says.

The family moved to London's rarefied St. John's Wood section when MacLean was 14. She soon discovered a less sedate neighborhood. "I met a girl at the bus stop, and she said she was going down to Kings Road for some coffee. All these bohemian people were around there, and they seemed to have such exciting lifestyles. We made one cup of coffee last four hours."

To her parents' dismay, the Hurst Lodge girls' school in Sunningdale (which Duchess Sarah Ferguson also attended) and a six-month stay in Australia failed to douse her fascination with counterculture. By age 17, there was "a break in family relations, and I was out on the street, living with a girlfriend."

For the next 15 years, MacLean traveled a fast lane crowded with celebrities and wrecks.

**Joining the band**

She spent several years working as a real estate agent before turning a temporary position into a career. Bruce MacLean knew CBS's Dave Margereson (best known as manager of the band Supertramp) and in 1971 heard he was looking for a fill-in secretary. Unity was hired, impressed Margereson, and stayed at CBS until 1975. Early on, she forged a casual friendship with a regular visitor to the office -- Bob Marley, protege of singer Johnny Nash. In 1972, Nash's version of Marley's "Stir it Up" became an international hit.

"Bob used to sit around the office, and everyone was extremely rude to him," she says. "I liked him, although he did speak with an awfully weird patois."

The Who's Keith Moon attended her 1972 wedding. Moon's affection for alcohol and hurling large objects from windows made him a high-risk guest, but he was "a perfect gentleman," MacLean says. "Keith came in and said, 'Oh, you don't seem to have a lot to drink here.' He got us bottles and bottles of champagne."

Eventually, MacLean secured an interview with Peter Grant, Zeppelin's manager. Grant's size (almost 300 pounds) matched his reputation for intimidation.

"He was a creep," says Cynthia Sach, 63, speaking from her London home in a raspy voice reminiscent of Keith Richards's growl. "He had to wield his power over people." Sach worked alongside MacLean, and they have kept in contact through the years. "We were quite strong people, so we could handle [Grant], whereas other people buckled under," she says. "Unity is a strong Scorpio."

Grant, who died from a heart attack in 1995, ran the business "like the mob," according to Bruce MacLean, who sometimes worked with obscure bands being considered for Swan Song recording contracts. "He thought he was the godfather." One of Grant's tactics was to maintain job insecurity in
the organization.

"I was always fired anytime Peter got angry with me," Unity says. "I used to phone up Richard [Cole] and he’d say, 'Oh, take no note. Peter will forget about it in the morning. See you in the office, luv, bye.'"

Mornings did not usually begin until afternoon for Grant. He would arrive with "bagfuls of smack and cocaine, stick an ordinary key in some cocaine, and put it under your nose," MacLean says. "There were huge rocks -- he'd never bother to chop them -- and his little group of thugs would get more fired up as they did more coke."

One of her responsibilities was to keep such scenes out of the London tabloids. In fact, she says, Grant ordered her to avoid publicizing the band altogether, reckoning that the absence of information would enhance its "mystique." Press releases were supplanted by tales of sexual escapades and Page's obsession with the occult (mere curiosity, according to MacLean).

"Mayhem used to come to that office," Cole says. "All the time."

**The haze of fame**

On a Saturday afternoon at British Imports, MacLean straightens a stack of PG Tips tea while "Hey Jude" hovers a notch above background volume. Zeppelin is "too much for the customers" she says, especially the first two albums, her favorites. Elaine and Errol Finkelstein, a Welsh couple who two years ago moved to Duxbury from South Africa, have popped in for Irish sausage. Until now, they had not heard about MacLean's previous life.

"Well, I hope you were their financial manager," Errol says, as if he is expecting someone to let him in on a joke.

After they leave, MacLean talks about the band members, whom she calls "ordinary blokes trying to make a living."

John "Bonzo" Bonham treated his body like the drum kits he pummeled and was prone to binges and blackouts. "When he was in a good mood he was a pussycat, very gregarious, generous to a fault," she says. "He'd always be the one to say to me, 'You're doing a great job, we really appreciate having you here.' But he was not the sort of person you'd want to be around when he was angry. Sometimes you thought he must be joking because he was so angry."

John Paul Jones -- like Bill Wyman in the Rolling Stones and John Entwistle in the Who -- played the strong, silent type. "They called him 'Gentleman Jonesy,'" MacLean says. "He'd always be presentable, in tiptop form. Just a kind of ordinary guy."

"Robert [Plant] wore fancy turquoise jewelry and big belts and looked very dapper when he came in, whereas Jimmy would ask the girls in the office to hem his pants because they'd be dragging along the ground."

Bonham, Jones, and Plant were "beholden" to Page despite his "waiflike" appearance, she says. But his business sense and musical agility dissipated as his drug intake mushroomed (speedballs, an injected combination of cocaine and heroin, were preferred). It created scenarios that rivaled "This Is Spinal Tap" for absurdity.
"Jimmy was so lost in his haze that it was difficult to know how he would be from one day to the next. He could be hours, days late for rehearsal. It got to the point where Robert would say, 'We're going to start at 2, which means Jimmy won't be there until 5, so we won't get there until 5.' When Jimmy worked that out, he didn't get there until 7. It was a bit of a game."

Cole, who has become a drug counselor and drives Sharon Osbourne's father around Los Angeles, says, "You would never get them in one place at one time." On a 1977 West Coast tour, he recalls, "They decided they each wanted assistants, and therefore I had to have an assistant to speak to their assistants."

MacLean admits to using cocaine "after business hours" but says being a witness to the downward spiral of Zeppelin's inner circle kept her in check. An incident at a Christmas office party typified the unstable atmosphere: "There was a commotion in the hall downstairs. Jimmy's girlfriend Charlotte had been looking everywhere for him, and he was saying, 'Tell her I'm not here.' When she saw Jimmy she whacked him across his face. Blood was all over the wall because she had thick rings on. I was amazed at the violence."

On Sept. 25, 1980, Bonham's body was discovered in Page's Windsor home. He was 32. MacLean was at work when she heard the news from reporters. Grant ordered the office closed, she says, and "the color drained out of my cheeks."

"I waited three months and quit. I was pregnant with Luke and didn't want to bring a child into a world surrounded by people who were dying or hellbent on killing each other."

Two summers ago, the MacLeans saw Plant perform at the Tweeter Center in Mansfield. "He was awful," Bruce says. Unity prefers to remember a younger version "preening in front of a mirror." They did not attempt to go backstage.

"I haven't had a dull life," MacLean says with a smile that crinkles her face. "I'm glad I did all those things."

But her gaze is not fixed on the old days. She is content to relive Led Zeppelin through the music and occasional story requests from fans who were not born when the band died. Twenty-three years later, a storefront on Court Street suits her better than a stairway to heaven.

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